

Laos's public secrets

U.S. now tells the truth,

STATINTL

but not all of it

By MICHAEL PARKS
Sun Staff Correspondent

Vientiane, Laos—After a decade of official American secrecy, the war in Laos is going public.

United States Embassy officials here say that the broad outlines of the American involvement in the war with the Communist Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese are known now although many specifics still are classified.

Groups of newsmen have toured formerly top-secret bases with the chief U.S. intelligence agent as their guide.

Open about raids

The frequent B-52 bomber raids over northern Laos now are acknowledged and their targets identified. A substantial part of the American war budget in Laos now is open to congressional and public scrutiny.

"Some people have gotten the feeling that the intensity of the war up here is increasing," says a senior American official. "Actually what is increasing is our visibility."

"We are just letting people know what is happening here. After all, the North Vietnamese war up here is increasing," says a senior American official. "After all, the North Vietnamese are the aggressors, not us."

A more cynical European diplomat takes a different view:

"The Americans have, it is true, told in general terms what they are doing. But they have revealed only 50 per cent of the facts, many of which were known anyway."

"They make the big points, they omit the details. Many of the details are important though."

Such details include:

1. The exact number of Thai mercenaries the United States is supporting in Laos, how they were recruited and what they are paid. The number reportedly is being doubled to 12,000.

Disclosing any information about the Thais, American officials here would not be to substantiated charges that the Nixon administration is violating a congressional ban on

the hiring of foreign mercenary troops.

2. The activities of the more than 100 military attaches and the estimated 300 "case officers" and "field technical representatives" the Central Intelligence Agency has here.

This information would provide proof for charges that the United States is violating the Geneva accords that neutralized Laos and banned foreign military and paramilitary personnel.

3. The number of American fighter-bomber strikes and B-52 missions flown in northern Laos, which would show an increase in the number of B-52 raids and a 60 to 70 per cent decline in those by the smaller planes since 1970.

Carrots, sticks

4. The inducements and threats the U.S. Embassy uses with various Laotian political factions to keep the "neutralist" government of Prince Souvanna Phouma, the premier, on an even keel as the country is devastated by a war that has increasingly less to do with the Lao.

5. The thefts of supplies and money by Lao officials from American aid programs, which the U.S. embassy ignores in order to keep good relations with the Vientiane government.

The American hierarchy here and the Nixon administration in Washington may never address these points.

A first accounting

But further details are expected to become public when the administration makes its first six-month accounting of expenditures under the Laotian war budget.

The accounting was ordered by Congress as part of legislation limiting American military and economic assistance to Laos to \$350 million in the 1972 fiscal year.

This represents a potential jump of \$65 million over last year. The limit does not include the cost of American bombing missions over Laos, which has been estimated at between \$1 billion and \$2 billion annually

The American establishment's increasing acknowledgment of U.S. activities here is attributable primarily to this budget limitation—"We have to account for everything we do now," one American officer complained—and to the preceding congressional debate and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which triggered the legislative interest.

But there are a number of indications that the current rate of spending here exceeds that allowed on an annual basis by Congress and that the Nixon administration, rather than seeking legislative approval for increased spending, will attempt to camouflage the higher costs through accounting gimmicks.

Shuffling the count

"Washington just asked us how many bombs and bullets we used. They are figuring how much they cost," said a top U.S. official.

"The cost can be figured lots of ways. Do you include handling and transportation costs? Do you include development costs?"

"Do you include pay for the Thai volunteers in the Lao or the Thai aid budget? Do you include costs already in the budgets at the bases in Thailand? . . . I guess the answers depend on how much we spend."

Officials here say that the Nixon administration might seek a supplemental appropriation, but wants to avoid a congressional clash over the war in an election year.

American military-aid administrators in Laos, however, have exceeded their budgets almost every year, sometimes by almost 100 per cent.

Ironically, Congress's spending limitation is likely to result in more American air strikes in Laos. The cost of bombs and fuel used in these missions are excluded from the \$350 million.

"What you are going to see, come April, May and June when the money runs short, is a lot of American pilots doing the job Lao pilots have been doing," says a U.S. Air Force officer stationed here.

Laotians bitter

The budget limitation, called the Symington amendment after its sponsor, Senator Stuart Symington (D., Mo.), also has stirred bitterness among the Lao.

"I don't care if the Americans want to tell the whole world exactly what they are doing here, but we can't fight a war counting each bullet and bomb and rifle," said Sisouk Na Champassak, the acting Laotian defense minister.

American officials here are also under orders from the U.S. Agency for International Development, which runs the American foreign aid program, not to use any agency funds for Lao military assistance or for CIA programs.

Many of the recent disclosures here have been anti-climatic, simply official acknowledgements of what already was widely known.

When correspondents were flown to the headquarters of the Laotian irregulars at Long Cheng, described as the CIA's top-secret command post for years, they were disappointed to find most of the radio and electronic gear gone.

But American agents were seen wandering nonchalantly around directing air strikes—just as everyone knew they did.

A British correspondent taken up to the Plain of Jars to cover a government operation came back wondering why he had been barred from covering previous operations.

"Lord only knows what they thought they were hiding," he said.

Top U.S. officials here say they have ordered greater efforts to provide accurate and complete information about the military situation to corre-